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Gibbon, Trish

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One of the objectives of Norway’s development cooperation with South Africa was to ‘consolidate the democratic transition’ (see Chapter 2). This objective is expressed at a high level of abstraction and requires translation into far more concrete terms before it becomes meaningful. In translating it, however, a number of difficult and contentious questions arise: What needed to be done to consolidate the democratic transition? Of the myriad of pressing issues competing for attention, which were to be selected and made the priorities? Who would make this decision?

This chapter argues that the success of SANTED as a particular example of development cooperation arises from the way in which this translation was effected and the wisdom of the issues identified for attention. Norway had already affirmed that education was a first priority. This was entirely congruent with the South African government’s identification of access to higher education as key to social justice and to the social and economic development of the country.

Under the apartheid system the majority of learners in South Africa had been denied access to its higher education system, mainly on the basis of race. Within the post-apartheid policy framework, learners who had historically been classified as black, coloured and Indian were now recognised as people who had been historically disadvantaged and thus the recipients of measures aimed at redressing these inequities. These equity concerns formed part of a broader spectrum of education policy goals which included substantial raising of participation rates in higher education. The government argued that the overall expansion of the
higher education system in South Africa was necessary to address both the inequalities of the past and meet the country’s development needs. The latter was acknowledged as essential to South Africa’s participation in a ‘knowledge driven world’ associated with the phenomenon of globalisation (Department of Education 2001:5).

This chapter discusses those projects in the second phase of the SANTED Programme, set up as the ‘Access, Retention and Success’ projects of SANTED II. They were the:

- Sakha Ngethemba Project – Student Access and Retention in a Nurturing Environment at the University of Fort Hare (UFH);
- SANTED-University of KwaZulu-Natal Access and Retention Project (SUKAR) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN); and
- Equitable Access, Retention and Success Project at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

In all of these projects, while the broad objectives were held in common, a critical factor contributing to their positive outcomes was the successful translation of the objectives into the particular context and strategic intentions of each institution at the time. For each of the institutions the context was defined by the complex and pervasive legacy of their designation within the racially defined apartheid higher education landscape, and the imperatives of an expanding and increasingly competitive post-apartheid higher education system. Each institution faced different challenges and each needed to re-contextualise the objectives of the project to match its own needs.

In 2004, as SANTED I was coming to an end, the national review of the programme argued that it should be extended for another five years. Moreover, the focus on improving access to higher education for historically disadvantaged learners should be retained and deepened in the second phase, as it remained a priority for a post-apartheid higher education system. However, the reviewers also pointed to an associated issue of concern that was becoming more evident within the system, sometimes referred to as the ‘revolving door’ syndrome. Many of the
students who entered the universities dropped out before completing their studies. The concern, therefore, was increasingly with student success and creating equitable opportunities for historically disadvantaged students to not only gain access to higher education, but also to succeed in their studies and to graduate (Hansen et al. 2005).

In 2004, although overall participation rates in the system remained below the targets of the National Plan (2001), significantly more historically disadvantaged students were now gaining access to the system (Council on Higher Education 2004). However, as the National Plan (2001) emphasised, ‘equity of access’ was not being matched by ‘equity of outcomes’. Thus, despite the increase in the enrolment of historically disadvantaged students, graduate output, especially in relation to qualification levels and areas of study, remained significantly skewed and unrepresentative of the South African population (Council on Higher Education 2004). It was starkly evident that many historically disadvantaged students were dropping out of the system before graduating. The graph below captures these trends in the South African higher education system between 1995 and 2002.

**Figure 1** African headcount enrolments and graduates in public higher education institutions

![Graph showing African headcount enrolments and graduates in public higher education institutions between 1999 and 2012](source: DHET (2013))
These throughput trends were extremely problematic, not only from an efficiency and effectiveness perspective, but because they also reflected a significant equity challenge within the system. In 1993, Morrow argued for the importance of recognising that access to higher education involved more than gaining formal access into an institution. Whilst gaining formal access was crucial, equally important was gaining access to the ‘essential goods which the university distributes’, that is, knowledge. He called this ‘epistemological access’ (Morrow 1993:3).

Throughput patterns across the system were showing that while many more historically disadvantaged students were gaining formal access to institutions, they were not gaining epistemological access, reflected in the inability of so many of them to successfully graduate. This is the challenge that institutions confronted in 2004, as they began to conceptualise the SANTED projects in this thematic area – the task of improving student success and ensuring epistemological access for historically disadvantaged students. It was argued that the depth of this challenge required institutions to focus their projects on ‘longer-term outcomes’ that would contribute to the kind of institutional and systemic changes that were needed (Smith & Cross 2009).

For the South African higher education system the epistemological access challenge is informed and shaped by two overarching concerns. The first has to do with what is required from South African universities as they negotiate their growing importance to national development needs within an increasingly globalised and knowledge-driven society. Central to this are the kinds of skills and high levels of knowledge required by a changing workplace defined by ‘new conditions of production and management’ (Castells 2009).

For South African higher education institutions, however, this challenge is exacerbated by a schooling system deeply damaged by the inequalities of the past that was and still is failing to prepare learners adequately for higher education. Those students most affected by the inadequacies of the schooling system are historically disadvantaged students, living in the poorest conditions with the most inadequate levels of educational provision. Institutions constantly have to find ways to address the inadequacies of the schooling system so that students
can progress with confidence in their studies. This burden is greatest in institutions with the highest concentration of poor, educationally disadvantaged students.

Addressing this challenge draws attention to what is happening within institutions themselves and the extent to which they are able to organise, manage and deliver their core academic functions in a way which creates the conditions for sustained epistemological access. Central to this is an institution’s ability to develop and manage teaching and learning processes that can respond to both the inadequacies of the schooling system and national development needs. As the emphasis in the SANTED II projects moved towards student success, strengthening the organisation, management and delivery of the teaching and learning mandate began to emerge as central to this second phase. All the institutions considered in this chapter were also affected, albeit to different degrees, by the reconfiguration of the public higher education system in the early part of the last decade. This generated challenges that also influenced and shaped how institutions constructed and used their SANTED II projects.

The next section shifts the discussion to the institutions themselves. It begins to explain why these SANTED projects were so important to the institutions at this juncture, why they were in need of assistance to address the epistemological access challenge, and how they sought to use the projects to leverage necessary change within the institution towards this end.

Conceptualising the projects and building an institutional framework for delivery

*The University of Fort Hare*

The situation at the University of Fort Hare (UFH) perhaps illustrates most clearly the apartheid legacy issues discussed earlier. UFH, like many of the historically black universities in South Africa, is located in an economically underdeveloped and marginalised rural area of South Africa. It is situated near Alice, a small town in the deep rural areas of the
Eastern Cape, the poorest province in the country. It draws the majority of its students from these surrounds. Not only do many students come from extremely poor families, but they also come from resource-poor schools which have not prepared them adequately for university study (UFH 2006). The Sakha Ngethemba (‘building in hope’) Project launched at UFH in 2006, had as its overarching objective to ‘address the factors which result in students being unable to complete their courses of study and graduate within a reasonable period of time’ (UFH 2006). It built strongly on the experiences and achievements of the Sahka Ngethemba Project of SANTED I, implemented between 2001 and 2005.

SANTED I at UFH had played a significant role in supporting ‘a massive transformation drive’ initiated at the university in 2000 as a response to a set of complex and wide ranging problems that it had struggled with towards the end of the 1990s (Knickelbein 2005). These problems were largely reflective of the persistent impact which the underdevelopment of historically black universities by the apartheid government continued to have on the institution. Most notably, it affected their ability to compete on an equal footing in an increasingly market-driven higher education system. Central to this challenge was the declining student numbers at the historically black universities as the system began to ‘de-racialise’ with more and more black students having the opportunity to enter the historically white institutions.

For UFH this challenge was exacerbated by its rural location with students also attracted by the benefits of attending an urban university. UFH argued that it was confronted by a set of challenges that reflected the ‘combined impact of internal dissonance and structural under-development’ (UFH 2000:14). Within this context, as part of the process of institutional transformation, the SANTED I Project had focused on building capacity by contributing to the creation of a critical mass of people with a shared vision of where the university wanted to go and with the skills to address these challenges (Knickelbein 2005:82).

By the time the second phase of Sakha Ngethemba began in 2006 the university was in a position to focus more specifically on the problem of student throughput (UFH 2006). In the rationale for the project, the university pointed to the challenges that it experienced, emerging out of
and shaped by the socio-economic realities described above. For UFH the epistemological access challenge was therefore strongly influenced by these socio-economic factors which needed to be addressed in a system where student throughput and success had become important for the allocation of state funding and improved efficiency. UFH acknowledged that it needed to enhance its capacity to respond to this challenge and once again recognised the SANTED II Project as an important mechanism to assist it to do this.

The Sakha Ngethemba Project of SANTED II was therefore largely orientated to building institutional capacity in academic and administrative areas. This would improve its ability to manage and deliver its teaching and learning mandate, especially in those areas most directly affecting student success. This included attention through the project to:

- the development of an institutional retention policy;
- institutional research;
- improved enrolment management measures;
- student tracking;
- student learning support; and
- teaching support (UFH 2006).

The second phase of SANTED at UFH also took as its starting point an important principle that had shaped the project in the first phase. This was its conceptualisation and implementation as a leadership-lead initiative within the institution. This was reflected most prominently through the strong support it received from the vice-chancellor and the senior management team, and through the organisational arrangements put in place to manage, implement and monitor the project. The project was managed by a project management committee made up of senior university personnel across different areas of responsibility.

**The University of the Western Cape**

At the University of the Western Cape (UWC) the Equitable Access, Retention and Success Project in SANTED II also built strongly on
the university’s experiences in SANTED I, and had similarly sought to address a set of deep and pervasive challenges for the university. These challenges, largely recognised as enrolment challenges, had emerged towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s and had ‘threatened [UWC’s] academic and financial viability’ (UWC 2005).

A pivotal factor influencing the university’s precarious position at this time was the impact, as was the case at UFH, of the dwindling student numbers at the historically black universities and the increasing competition across the sector both for students and for alternative funding sources (Hansen et al. 2005). This latter challenge was especially important for UWC as it was increasingly exposed to competition from its historically privileged and well-resourced neighbouring universities. The university argued at the time that these challenges were exacerbated by the levels of educational disadvantage and poverty of many of its students. While these socio-economic challenges were not as extreme as those faced by UFH, within the context of the Western Cape, UWC still attracted the poorest and most educationally disadvantaged students seeking a university education.

As had been the case at UFH, when SANTED II was initiated and UWC began to conceptualise their participation in this phase, it had managed to address a number of the challenges described above, especially in relation to its enrolment base which had been effectively stabilised (UWC 2005). The university recognised the significant contribution the SANTED I funding had made to its efforts and was intent on continuing to use SANTED as a tool to leverage necessary change in the institution in pursuit of its strategic goals.

With this positive experience informing its thinking, a number of issues became important to how the Equitable Access, Retention and Success Project was advanced in the second phase of SANTED. UWC wished to continue to strengthen a number of the very positive initiatives that had received substantial support in SANTED I and which advanced the university’s strategic intentions. These included:

- improving access for historically disadvantaged learners by intervening at the school–university interface;
- strengthening its postgraduate capacity in support of its strategic
Like UFH, the UWC project was conceptualised and driven as a leadership initiative through its organisational arrangements and management structure. Located within the Institutional Planning division of the Vice-Chancellor’s Office, the project was managed by a Project Board chaired by the vice-chancellor and supported by members of the university executive with areas of responsibility addressed through the project. The Project Board also included the directors of divisions within the university most centrally involved in the project’s implementation, linking again at a structural level, the project and its role in taking forward the different strategic intentions of the institution.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) came into being in 2004 as a result of the far-reaching and complex merging of the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville. The merger not only brought together a former historically white institution and a former historically black institution, but also five geographically separated campuses, including teachers’ colleges and a medical school. This resulted in, by international standards, a very large and complex institution with just under 40 000 students (UKZN 2007).

The SANTED University of KwaZulu-Natal Access and Retention Project (SUKAR), which also built on lessons that had been learnt from SANTED I at the University of Durban Westville, began in 2006. Drawing from these lessons, the UKZN was intent on ensuring that the ‘transformatory potential’ of the project ‘for the university as a whole’ be
realised by having a more explicit focus on retention and concentrating on embedding the project within the ‘mainstream’ curriculum of the university (Hansen et al. 2005:20).

Like the other universities, UKZN recognised the importance of the project as a tool to enhance the capacity of its academic project to respond more effectively to the epistemological access challenge. It recognised that at this critical time in its development, enhancing its capacity required the careful bringing together of separate academic infrastructures from the two primary institutions, including teaching and learning practices, approaches and organisational forms. The SUKAR II Project provided an opportunity to build a new ethos around teaching and learning at the newly merged institution. It could also enhance institutional integration and establish new partnerships between staff previously located at the different pre-merged institutions (Dhunpath 2010). It created an opportunity to begin to integrate academic development initiatives to support and improve student learning into mainstream teaching and learning activities across the five new campuses. This was recognised as an increasingly important challenge as the new institution sought to respond to a much larger and substantially more diverse student body, with very different school experiences and levels of preparedness.

The project was therefore designed to respond to some of the merger challenges that UKZN was experiencing, particularly towards addressing the imperatives of access, redress and success within the strategic framework of the newly merged institution (UKZN 2010). It was conceptualised around two central focus areas: to improve equity of student access, retention and success rates; and to contribute to building academic (teaching) capacity at the newly merged UKZN (Dhunpath 2010).

Driven by these broad objectives the project was conceived of as a set of smaller projects, with a number of elements strongly embedded within the faculties, which were collectively designed to address these areas of strategic importance:

- institutional access and throughput research;
- collaboration with secondary schools;
Supporting and Enhancing the Academic Project

- integration of alternative access programmes; and
- enhancing postgraduate and undergraduate throughput.

SUKAR II, reflecting a similar approach to UFH and UWC, was taken forward at UKZN by the leadership of the institution. However, what was especially important about the project for the institution was the impact it had on supporting the argument for the creation of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning position at UKZN. Once this position was in place, the project was moved to this office and managed and directed by the new DVC, thus strengthening its strategic value and importance for the institution.

Building institutional capacity and enhancing organisational learning

The overview of the specific institutional contexts presented above, the project objectives and organisational arrangements put in place, show how each of them aimed to bring about institutional change to improve student success and enhance epistemological access for historically disadvantaged students. In each case, the design of the project reflected a careful and nuanced understanding of the complex nature of this challenge for that specific institution. Central to this challenge were those processes of the university, academic and administrative, most important to an effective and responsive teaching and learning environment.

However, institutional change by its very nature is highly complex, especially within higher education institutions. It is influenced by a range of structural and conjunctural conditions external to the university and by ‘human agency’ which affects the ‘pace, nature and outcome of institutional change’ (Badat 2009:457).

This section reflects on the projects themselves, but recognises that within the limitations of a chapter of this nature, these insights cannot do justice to the very real challenges each of the projects faced on a daily basis and the complexities of the change processes they initiated and shaped. Suffice to say that for all of the institutions involved, the SANTED II Access, Retention and Success projects made a fundamental
contribution to the institutions and what they are seeking to realise as South African public higher education institutions. Those elements common to the three projects which are important to understanding why and in what way they were able to make such an important contribution are discussed.

While the focus in this section is on how the projects contributed to building the capacity of their institutions to respond more effectively to the epistemological access challenge, it is important to note that between 2001 and 2010, the period in which both phases of the SANTED Programme were implemented, each of the institutions showed a steady improvement in overall student success rates. Between 2001 and 2010 UFH improved its success rate from 65 to 78 per cent, UKZN from 69 to 75 per cent and UWC from 73 to 78 per cent (Centre for Higher Education Transformation 2012). These indicators provide evidence of a trajectory of improvement to which the projects clearly contributed.

The overviews of the projects’ design described earlier show that each of the projects reflected ‘institutionalised agendas’, where the projects’ operational plans and what they sought to take forward were embedded within the broader strategic goals of the institution. All three projects were conceived, therefore, as strategic ‘tools’ that the institution would use to take forward, materially and conceptually, important strategic interventions and necessary processes of institutional change.

The Council on Higher Education (2007:182), in explaining change in higher education, argues that ‘change is as dependent on capacity as it is on political will’. Clearly, in all of the three institutions such political will was in place. This was evident through senior leadership support for the project. Most notably this is seen in the chairing in all three cases of the central project management structure by the vice-chancellor or the deputy vice-chancellor, and through the projects’ reporting lines and institutional locations. However, these leaders also recognised both the importance of epistemological access to their strategic intentions and, most importantly, that increased capacity was needed to adequately address this challenge. They recognised that the projects provided a valuable mechanism for building such capacity and that it
would primarily involve strengthening the academic project through improvements to teaching and learning practice and administrative support mechanisms. In fact, in the Mid-Term Review of the SANTED II Programme, the reviewers noted the importance of capacity building to what the programme had managed to achieve, arguing that ‘capacity building became a major spin-off from all the activities of SANTED in both phases’ (Smith & Cross 2009:7).

The contribution all three projects were able to make to building institutional capacity came about because of what they were able to achieve and because of the way in which they were conceptualised and organised within the institution. The latter was substantially influenced by the approach of senior management to the project. This suggests that where institutional projects are aimed at influencing institutional change processes and addressing high-level strategic goals, they must be designed and managed in a manner which provides them with the leadership support they need to have legitimacy and to be of maximum benefit to the organisation. However, such support needs to extend beyond expressed commitment by institutional leaders. It must include leadership thinking about where the project is located and the levels of institutional authority associated with this location, the management processes in place to direct project decision-making, and how best to align project objectives and activities with broader institutional functioning.

In these three projects the organisational arrangements put in place show that in each institution the different elements of the projects were all included into important areas of leadership responsibility. Put another way, the different elements of the project were taken forward in the institutions by role-players with sufficient levels of institutional responsibility and authority to deliver on the issue addressed. In many instances, project activities were integrated into the work activities of the responsible person, providing legitimacy for activities and their objectives, and further embedding them into the strategic direction of the institution. The project also provided a valuable learning experience for these staff members, becoming an important training ground for leadership development. This is a critical element to building sustainable institutional capacity.
Another and obvious way in which the projects were able to build institutional capacity was through new institutional structures, systems and procedures. These were put in place through the project or came about indirectly through evidence which influenced leadership thinking. These achievements included:

- the setting up and strengthening of new senior portfolios and offices, particularly around teaching and learning at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels;
- the development of new administrative systems to support student throughput and success, such as student tracking systems;
- the establishment of innovative monitoring and evaluation systems, especially to enhance student enrolment, track progress and improve teaching and learning practice; and
- the development of new institutional policies around issues related to student success, such as retention and assessment practice.

These achievements all reflect ways in which the projects and their objectives were institutionalised, becoming part of the normal organisation and functioning of the universities, including being integrated into institutional planning and budgeting.

Institutional capacity was also built through the breadth of the projects’ foci – a reflection on the extent to which the universities recognised the complex and multi-faceted nature of the epistemological challenge and what is required to address it comprehensively. This was evident from the range of issues given attention through the project and the different institutional portfolios that participated in the various project structures. An important consequence of this multifaceted approach was that the projects set up structures and initiated processes that required staff to work collaboratively across traditional and deeply entrenched institutional boundaries. Encouraging staff to move and think out of their institutional ‘silos’ was important to realising the objectives of the projects and created the momentum for new communities of practice to develop across the institution. These new communities remain important sites for ongoing organisational learning and as drivers of change.
As already noted, institutional capacity development through strategic projects requires attention to institutionalising the project and its outcomes. Project institutionalisation is most often understood to include the putting in place of new institutional structures, portfolios and procedures through the project and/or the ‘taking over’ by the institution of financial responsibility for project activities or outcomes. While this is important, project institutionalisation needs to be understood more broadly than this. Project institutionalisation must also involve a ‘sense-making’ or ‘ideological element’, where projects enable role-players within the institutions to begin to make sense of required institutional changes (Astvik et al. 2005) and consider what they would mean for their own practices and execution of responsibilities.

Strategic projects, as was the case with these three projects, must be able to contribute to organisational learning where new ways of thinking emerge within the institution that translate into new practices and ways of doing things, far out-living the project’s duration and becoming embedded in the culture and day-to-day functioning of the organisation. The SANTED II projects discussed here provide evidence of project institutionalisation having taken place at both a ‘structural’ and at a ‘ideological’ level within the institutions.

One of the most effective ways in which the projects were able to facilitate such ‘sense-making’ and associated organisational learning was through piloting as a project strategy. In a number of different cases, project activities involved piloting new organisational practices, institutional policies and strategic interventions. This project strategy was encouraged and supported by the funders who recognised that piloting provided the universities with opportunities for experimentation, where new insights could be gained and shared using donor funding rather than drawing from limited, highly contested institutional funds. Moreover, these piloting activities created ‘supported spaces’ for learning within the institutions. This created opportunities outside formal institutional structures and processes for in-depth discussion around complex and sometimes sensitive issues, without directly challenging staff and their own practice and undermining institutional confidence. They also created possibilities for good practices to emerge, which could then be
embedded within the institution, principally, as noted above, where they involved working across traditional institutional boundaries.

In all of the projects, piloting activities were also linked to the undertaking of various institutional research tasks, aimed primarily at collating evidence to inform institutional responses to the epistemological access challenge beyond the scope of the project. In addition to the information gathered, these institutional research tasks contributed to building research capacity at the universities, with some producing publications on the research undertaken and thus contributing to the production of new knowledge. In all of the universities the projects strengthened the case for ongoing reflection and interrogation of existing practices and systems, particularly around the organisation and delivery of their teaching and learning mandate.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a picture of the three Access, Retention and Success projects of the SANTED II Programme, building on the foundations laid and lessons learnt from SANTED I. It has argued that each of these projects was able to make a substantial and profound contribution to their institutions.

It was argued that central to this has been the ways in which the projects have enhanced the capacity of the institutions to improve student success and address the challenge of epistemological access to higher education for the majority of learners in South Africa – learners who in the past, and who remain, socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged by the inequalities of apartheid and its pervasive impact on the present South African reality.

This contribution would not have been possible without the presence within these institutions, both at the time of conceptualisation and implementation, of insightful and dynamic leadership, who, put simply, took these projects seriously. These institutional leaders were able to recognise and maximise the value of the projects for their institutions, using them to leverage necessary processes of institutional change and organisational learning. In particular, they recognised the importance
of strengthening their institutions’ teaching and learning mandate so as to better respond to the needs of their students and enhance the opportunities for successful academic study.

Equally important to why the projects were able to make the contribution they did, was the manner in which the projects were designed. The projects’ organisational arrangements were intentionally embedded within existing institutional structures and their objectives mirrored the strategic intentions of their institutions. Similarly, their activities were designed to facilitate necessary but difficult processes of institutional change that would not only lead to new structures and practices, but also new ways of thinking and understanding across the institution.

An aspect which is easily overlooked, but of critical importance, was the model of donor support that provided for institutional ownership and direction, and which respected the individual institutional contexts. Throughout the duration of SANTED, the projects were supported by a national project framework which, while providing for careful processes of financial and leadership accountability, enabled flexibility at the institutional level so that institutions could, within the broad objectives of the project, adapt project activities to emerging needs and priorities.

The lessons from the equitable Access, Retention and Success projects of SANTED II suggest that strategic projects of this nature provide a unique opportunity to manage change within the academy, primarily by influencing strategic thinking and by grappling with new processes and practices. The epistemological access challenge which underpinned the focus of these projects with its inherent complexities for South African universities will remain for some time to come. For the institutions discussed here, this challenge will include continuing to take forward the insights, organisational changes, new practices and leadership capacity generated through their access, retention and success projects.
Endnotes

1. A term accepted in South African discourse to denote people of mixed race.
2. This ratio indicates what proportion of the courses for which students were enrolled were passed in a specific year. Success rates are calculated by dividing the university’s full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolled student total by its FTE degree credit total (Centre for Higher Education Transformation 2012).